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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000312

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SUBJECT: Sitrep 1: Numbers and Spirits Drop On Third Day of
Protests

Refs: A) Minsk 297 B) Minsk 308

11. (C) Summary: In the evening on March 21, Poloffs observed the third protest rally on October Square organized by Ten Plus Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and Belarusian Social Democratic Party ("Gramada") Aleksandr Kozulin. At the height of the rally, Poloffs estimated that approximately 2,000-3,000 demonstrators Q mainly young, college-aged students - were present on October Square. Despite having previously agreed to send the demonstrators home, Kozulin and Milinkevich gave differing instructions to the crowd; Kozulin told them to go home and prepare for a large rally on March 25, while Milinkevich, under pressure from his wife, remained with the protesters overnight. Visible security presence on the square decreased, but GOB harassment, detention and intimidation of protesters continued. State media portrayed the demonstrations in a poor light, while MOI officials threatened to punish the protesters and their leaders. End Summary.

Kozulin and Milinkevich Give Differing Instructions to the Crowd

12. (U) Milinkevich thanked the crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 people for their perseverance and urged the protesters to hold out until March 25, when they would again host another large rally on October Square. [Note: March 25 marks the 88th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic, which was the country's first, brief independence from Russia in 1918.] Milinkevich told the demonstrators that he would remain on the square as long as his supporters were there and said to them, "We will stay. There are more of us today than yesterday, and tomorrow there will be even more." He promised to convene a large rally every evening at 18:30 until March 25.

13. (C) Kozulin announced to the crowd "a revolution has taken place." However, he told the crowd that a "police operation" is being prepared and advised them to pack up the tent camp, to end the rally, and to conserve energy to regroup on the March 25. According to a press release on his website, Kozulin's instructions were what he and Milinkevich agreed to tell the supporters, but Milinkevich failed to comply. Since Milinkevich broke the agreement, Kozulin wrote in his press release that whatever happens to the protesters on October Square is Milinkevich's fault. [Note: Sources from the Milinkevich camp told us that Milinkevich and Kozulin had agreed to tell the protesters to leave and return on March 25, but Milinkevich's wife convinced her husband to stay with the protesters.]

Protesters Remain Overnight Despite Harassment from Security

¶4. (U) By late evening March 21, the crowd size decreased to some 200 people. Throughout the night, the protesters played Belarusian rock and folklore music on the portable loudspeakers and waved banned nationalist Belarusian flags. Milinkevich and his wife remained at the square overnight with the activists until 8:00 a.m. on March 22.

¶5. (C) Zubr activist Alexandr Atroshenkov told Post that demonstrators are still being detained, mostly as they go for food, search for restrooms, or are on their way home. Atroshenkov claimed that those who bring in food or warm clothes are detained, and usually beaten. Security forces search the bags of all persons attempting to access the square.

Security Around Square Decreases, But Intimidation and Harassment Remain High

¶6. (SBU) Emboffs observed that the security presence around October Square on March 21 continued to wane, reflecting the smaller number of protesters. That said, there were enough special forces units, uniformed police and plainclothes security forces on and around the square to break up the rally, if necessary. Unlike the previous evening, plainclothes security forces did not bother Emboffs while they observed the March 21 demonstrations. [Note: On March 20, the KGB harassed and followed Emboffs' movements as they were observing the demonstration. State media tried to conduct an interview with one of the Emboffs, and addressed him by name.]

¶7. (C) Emboffs did not observe any incidents of violence, but Milinkevich team members and civil society activists have informed us that an untold number of Belarusians caught entering or leaving the square were arrested and beaten at the police

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stations.

¶8. (U) Before the rally, authorities cut off electricity to the square so that all of the buildings on the square that are usually illuminated were darkened, making visibility low and video-recording difficult.

State Media Covers the Demonstrations in a Poor Light

¶9. (U) State television channels covered the protests on their March 21 evening broadcasts. However, they stressed the small size of the crowd. State media interviewed passersby, who remarked on how pointless and disgraceful the protests were. State TV channels also interviewed alleged protesters, who expressed their disappointment with the small size of the crowd. Foreign news channels, including Russian NTV, Euronews and CNN provided coverage of the March 21 rally.

MOI Urges Punishment of Opposition Protesters

¶10. (U) Interior Ministry official Henadz Klepcha urges administrative code punishments to all rally participants and "the severest punishments" for the leaders of the protests, for "they [i.e. the leaders] are getting young people drunk." Klepcha refused to reveal the exact number of people who have been arrested over the past few days for their participation in the protests.

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EU HOMs Attend Rally to Support the Democratic Process

(SBU) EU Ambassadors from Britain, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, France and the Czech Republic attended the

unsanctioned meeting at October Square on March 21. The EU HOMs wandered into the middle of the crowd and up to the steps of the Palace of the Trade Union, where Milinkevich and Kozulin addressed the audience. Latvian ambassador and EU head Maira Mora told independent media that the ambassadors came to the square "to see what is happening and to see everything for themselves." She reminded the reporter that demonstrations are part of the democratic process and of the importance of guaranteeing free expression and association. UK Ambassador Brian Bennett said that the EU diplomats came to the square not to "interfere in Belarus' internal affairs," but "to support the democratic process which we think is the main thing for any country." [Note: The Latvian Ambassador told Ambassador that Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov summoned the EU HOMs to his office for a 4:00 p.m. meeting on March 22.]

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